

Main - for review center

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MOCHI

One thing the Japanese people can never go without in celebrating New Year is Mochi or Ricecake. To children, particularly, the making or purchase of mochi a few days before the year ends is an occasion of great joy. To be unable to buy a few mochi for children is regarded as the greatest trial of poverty at the year-end.

Mochi is shortened from Mochi-ii (round rice). Steamed rice is beaten into a pasty state to make mochi. It seems to have been made into convenient flat round pieces from the very beginning, thus derived its name of Moch-ii.

At first, it was offered to Kami and shrines, and then to be eaten on festive occasions. It was from the Heian Period (794 - 1185) that it has been specially eaten at New Year.

Zeni or mochi soup came to be eaten particularly on New Year's Day since about the Muromachi Period (1392 - 1573 A.D.) As mochi is used on all happy occasions, Zeni is also eaten at wedding banquets and other festivals.

Kagami Mochi, or the New Year decoration of a round mochi placed on top of a large one, is the product of the Tokugawa Period, when artistic and decorative trends entered rapidly into the peaceful life of the people.

Mochi is a symbol of happiness, and used at all festivals, the erection of new houses, and other felicitous occasions.

TYPICAL FOODS FROM RICE

Mochi (rice cake) is prepared in one of two ways: by steaming and pounding mochi-gome flour with water and steaming the dough. Records show that mechi was eaten by Japanese as far back as the Nara era, but it isn't clear whether mechi was invented in Japan or introduced from China. It could be closely related to the Chinese nine-layer rice cake or the sponge-like rice cake.

Since ancient times, the Japanese people offered round-shaped kagami-mechi to the gods and ate it themselves at New Year and on other festive occasions. The farmer invariably pounds mechi at festivals and on days when special farm rites are held. The farm rites were held in gratitude to the gods for previous good harvests of crops and in securing future abundance of crops.

Several different types of mechi:

- 1) Kusa mechi - herb mechi for Dolls Festival on March 3rd
- 2) Chimaki - mechi for Boys festival on May 5th
- 3) Ineko mechi - eaten on November 1st

And on January 1st, tose, a sweetened sake, and mechi, or rice cake are served at breakfast for the first three days of January, as means of praying for longevity and health. New Year is a time when unusual meanings are given to foods; a time of much symbolism. TAI is eaten because of its determination to overcome obstacles; KOMBU (sea weed) for happiness. MAME (beans or peas) may be interpreted to mean robust or devoted.

GIFTS

When a gift is received, a return gift must be offered within a certain time limit as required by the occasion. Customs vary within the region. (Weddings, funerals, and birth)

Birth - It is customary to make mechi (rice cake) on the 3rd or 7th day after birth, or on the 33rd day, which is the day for the miya-mari (visit to the shrine), or on the 75th day, called the ubu-aki. This mechi is distributed to all friends who sent presents during the joy of birth.

DEATH

When anyone dies, his friends of the same age prepare mechi or dango and put it in their ears. Sometimes they also eat parched beans, or give them to children to eat; which is still found in some places, and the mechi that is used is called momi-fusagi-mechi. The reason is thought to be that these friends are afraid of being struck by the same calamity. Some scholars explain it by saying that, except for our own families, we eat most often with friends our own age; so we may be in danger from the same causes as they are. This changing of eating habits is a precaution against it.

MOCHI-TSUKI

The last week in December is Mechi-Tsuki (rice-pounding) time. It is eagerly looked forward to by all, particularly children. Mechi is indispensable in celebrating New Year, and its making has always been a great affair in each household.

In the old days, Mechi-Tsuki was done in every household. Rural people made it themselves, but in cities, Mechi-Tsuki men brought usu (mortars), pestles, big kettles and rice steaming frames to each household. In the presence of the whole family, they pounded mechi for them. The eating of the newly-made mechi was done with quite a ceremony.

Nowadays in cities, mechi-making is generally done by confectionery shops which take orders and deliver the mechi. Thus much of the joy of mechi-making has been lost. However, many city shops display usu and kine (pestles) for sale in December, proving that these mechi-making utensils are still in demand.

Even though city folk do not actually make it themselves, many prefer to see it made before their eyes, and so have mechi-pounders come to their homes.

Mechi has always been eaten on festive occasions and in some places, it is taken as daily food. On New Year's Day, it is presented to Kami and one's ancestors. Originally, the mechi presented to Kami was divided up and given to each person to insure his good fortune. Many people still believe that mechi gives strength to their body.

This rice-cake is made of mechi-gome or glutinous rice,

but millet, arrowroot bracken feet or horse-chestnuts are often mixed according to districts, to give a different taste or to increase the quantity of mochi.

- 1) The uncooked mochi rice is soaked for 24 hours before steaming to make the rice pasty and glutinous. There is always someone watching the "sero" as the mochi rice cooks. Special rice, never eaten as ordinary rice is used for making mochi. Higher gluten content allows it to be pounded into a semi-elastic state.
- 2) Steam from the broiler penetrates the thin layer of rice in each part of the sero. At the bottom of each sero section loose fitting bamboo strips are laid.
- 3) Moving upward after a certain time, chalk marks record family's name, amount and timing.
- 6) As the rice is cooked, the top[?] box is the first to be emptied of its contents.
- 7) The sero section's are dumped into the usu. Slat bottom woven into a mat by three cords, will be replaced, changed with dry rice, and returned to the steamer. Second batch steams while first batch is beaten.
- 10) The mallet soaking in the bucket of water is called the "kine". It is very heavy and is used for the pounding the rice. The kine is soaked in water preventing the hot rice from sticking to it. The covered mortar in the back is called the usu.
- 11) The pounding begins. The men will rotate pounding because it is very strenuous work lifting the heavy kine.
- 12) Two or three men pound, while one person (usually a woman) folds the dough back upon itself. Rice gradually becomes mochi as beating develops the gluten.
- 13) Timing is important, usually the pounders sound off to keep the rhythm. In Japan, the mortar was formed from an old upright tree stump.
- 16) Tempo is touchy, in the final stages a man-woman team takes over. With each smash, she dips her hands in water, then turns the dough over for the next smash.
- 28) A veteran smiles as he lifts the dough, still hot and perfectly formed, Mochi is not passable until every trace of rice has mushed into completely smooth and flavorless paste.
- 29) Teams of women form the mochi into dome-shaped cakes by tearing, brisk rolling and gentle patting. The mochi dough is stickier than it looks, so the job is more difficult than it sounds.

- 30) Red azuki beans are cooked, skins removed and sweetened. A spoonful of azuki paste is molded into the center of each cake.
- 35) A carpenter has placed an offering upon his saw. So likewise the farmer honors his plow, the fisherman his boat, in token of gratitude to those inanimate objects which secure his living. In olden days, holiday lasted till the seventh day, called "Nanakusa". Business is suspended as long as possible. Early on the morning of nanakusa, rice gruel with seven special herbs is prepared and eaten, and all decorations come down and are burned in token of purification.
- 36) The memory of those passed on is honored at New Year. Before the tablets of deceased members of the family, in the household Buddhist altar, sits the mochi offering. Honored too is Amida Buddha, Lord of Boundless Light. "Dai-Dai" (a type of bitter orange) that traditionally sits atop the mochi, has in Hawaii been replaced with a California variety. Word "Dai-Dai" means from "generation to generation". Fern leaf, suggesting prosperity completes the offering.
- 37) In the homes of Shinto belief there will be found sitting on a shelf high on the wall, the family shrine, "O-miya" this is the focus of home Shinto worship. At New Year it is more elaborately tended than usual. Offerings of salt, mochi, rice, sake, and water are generally made. Daikoku, god of good fortune, arrives with a full cargo of prosperity in the Takara Bune, or treasure ship. Many homes contain both O-miya and a Buddhist shrine.